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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL FLAKE: FIDEL EBBING AWAY

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11. (SBU) Summary: CODEL Flake arrives at a pivotal, historic time in Cuba. We and others consider Fidel Castro's health to be so critical that he could die any day. His brother, Raul Castro, has been in charge since July 31, 2006, and has done nothing to significantly change the Cuban regime's totalitarian or anti-American character. The Cuban people, on the other hand, have great expectations for change, are pro-American, and are not likely to be as accepting of the status quo under Raul as they have been under Fidel. The peaceful pro-democratic opposition has thought through what their country's post-communist future should look like, although for now they lack the horsepower to themselves force change. The U.S. Government, having recently updated its assessments and contingency plans with the June release of the report from the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (CAFC-II), stands ready to assist a democratic transition. What we are not ready to do is legitimize a hereditary succession from one dictator to another, without any consultation with the Cuban people. Our public statements have placed the responsibility for reform with Cubans on the island, and called upon the ruling clique to release political prisoners, dismantle the police state, and permit the development of political parties, civil society and a free market. The regime's answer has been to flex its police-state muscles and stifle opposition. Subsidies from Venezuela have played a key role in keeping the dictatorship afloat. End summary.

12. (SBU) Fidel Incapacitated: The regime announced on July 31 that Fidel Castro was too ill to lead the country and that Raul Castro would be "temporarily" in charge. Since then Fidel Castro has appeared in brief videos and met a handful of VIP visitors to the Non-Aligned Movement Summit the second week in September. Fidel Castro's non-appearance at December 2 anniversary events commemorating 50 years of the rebel army and 80 years of his life is the best indicator that he is probably near death. Even if kept alive into 2007, we do not expect him to be actively involved in running the country. He has not spoken in public since July 26.

13. (SBU) Raul Equals Continuity: Raul Castro as acting president has made a few cabinet changes, but not in the direction of reform. His speeches to the Non-aligned Movement and on the December 2 anniversaries were doctrinaire and anti-American, but without his brother's long-windedness or histrionics. State-run media have run stories about

corruption in the economy, but with a view towards squeezing more efficiency and discipline from the communist system. A state-run labor conference in October also decreed tighter discipline, ideological rigor and better output within an unchanged command-economy. Two billion dollars per year in Venezuelan subsidies, plus a similar amount in revenue from tourism help keep this inefficient system from collapsing entirely of its own weight. And human rights abuses have continued as ugly as ever. For example:

-- In Havana on December 10, International Human Rights Day, a mob of at least 200 communist militants directed by at least 100 State Security officials violently broke up a peaceful march by 12 peaceful activists in front of the UNESCO building.

-- In Santa Clara on October 10, the opening day of a conference of independent librarians, militants brutally attacked two dissidents. Orestes Suarez Torres, a welder, and his wife Nancy Gonzalez Garcia, a cigar roller, were left with black eyes, deep bruises and cuts. The husband also suffered broken ribs, and the wife had her trousers ripped off.

-- In Havana on November 24, 63 members of opposition youth groups held a meeting. Afterwards, the Government detained or threatened at least six participants, one of whom was informed he will likely be charged with espionage.

-- In Pinar del Rio in November, guards at Taco Taco prison showed up at political prisoner Orlando Zapata's cell and hauled him away for a forced and bloody shave and haircut. When he objected, the guards punched him in the head repeatedly and kicked him in the stomach.

-- In Las Tunas on August 3, 100 militants staged an "act of
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repudiation" in front of the home of the family of political prisoner Jose Garcia Paneque. His wife, Yamile Llanes, was home with 11 youngsters when the mob arrived. The children started crying when a member of the mob shouted, "Let's set the house on fire and burn the worms!" One seven-year-old girl remains traumatized.

Although the Raul-led regime released one political prisoner from the 2003 group of 75, it also detained others; the net number of documented political prisoners remains over 300 by mid-December.

14. (SBU) Change: Cubans from all over the island tell us they expect changes after Fidel Castro dies; however, it is not clear who or what will be the agent of that change. Leading dissidents (Oswaldo Paya, Martha Beatriz Roque, Vladimiro Roca) have organizations that have planned for change, but do not themselves have the means to force the regime's hand. They expect that the stresses and strains on Raul from elsewhere in "the palace" or from popular pressure to improve standards of living will force the regime to collapse. That said, in the short term, Raul Castro still commands all the security forces, including the pervasive spy network run by the Ministry of Interior. In 48 years of rule, the regime has been most successful in instilling fear, which has the effect of immobilizing many would-be dissidents. In this environment, and with no immediate prospects of improving their lives economically, most young Cubans' preferred option is to migrate to the United States. We issue over 20,000 travel documents per year, and more than 5,000 others migrate illegally.

15. (SBU) USG's Principled Position: Raul Castro mentioned, in a December 2 speech that was largely anti-American, that he was ready to sit down with the USG and negotiate our differences. Our reaction, which has earned effusive support from Cuba's democratic opposition, is that Raul Castro needs to consult with the Cuban people first. We, along with some

of our allies, have also made public a call to release all political prisoners, a point which unites the entire dissident movement, and is the raison d'etre of the "Ladies in White," who have continued to march every Sunday after attending mass to pray for the release of their loved ones.

¶6. (SBU) The other aspects of our relationship with Cuba are clearly spelled out by Helms-Burton and other legislation, and by the recommendations in the CAFC reports. We are reaching out both to the opposition and, to the extent possible, to the Cuban people. Our aim is to help to break through Cuba's information blockade, and seek to deny resources to the regime, which we are certain would make ill use of them -- financing anti-American propaganda, assaults on fragile democracies, and keeping in place the police-state apparatus. As Raul Castro was making his oft-quoted reference to negotiations with the USG, his government was holding USINT government property hostage at Cuban ports, along with private property of USINT staff. Our staff is the object of systematic spying, harassment, break-ins at our residences and other abuses.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: We expect the Cuban regime to warmly receive CODEL Flake because they've read the advance media reports and expect the CODEL will call for changes in US policy towards Cuba. We see this as an opportunity: To teach the Cuban regime a lesson in separation of powers; and provide US Members of Congress with a chance to express their views to senior regime officials about democratization, human rights and free markets.

PARMLY